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Post Daily Magazine

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The Road to Success

FIVE FAMOUS MEN TAKE YOU ALONG

ARTICLE II

By HELEN DUDAR

THE PRAISE or blame for the radical change in the face of New York in the last decade—its transformation into a forest of clean-lined rectangular glass slabs—is generally considered to fall to one man.

Wallace Kirkman Harrison did not build them all, but he is almost universally acknowledged to be the most influential figure in modern building design and his is the responsibility for leading the way. It is profoundly characteristic of Harrison that, although he might easily be persuaded to accept the blame, his New England conscience would insist on distributing the credit to others.

A large, intense, hearty man with the shambling gait of a tired stock clerk, Wallace Harrison has, for the past 30 years, been associated with firms that have built better than $1,000,000,000 worth of structures in New York, the nation and abroad.

Among projects he is closely identified with are Rockefeller Center, the Eastchester Housing Development, the Alcoa Building (done, appropriately, in aluminum), the new Time-Life Building, the Hotel Avila in Caracas, Corning Glass' New York office, the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Langley, Va., and the fish-shaped First Presbyterian Church in Stamford, Conn. As head of Harrison and Abramovitz, he coordinated the design of the UN headquarters. His present major project is the new Metropolitan Opera House for Lincoln Center.

None of these activities has made Harrison rich. When it comes to wealth, he stands in this series of portraits of modern Horatio Algers about where a kitten would be in relation to a lion—but it is a position largely of his own choosing.

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FOR 17 YEARS, STARTING WITH HIS 14TH, Harrison's life was a period of almost unrelieved grubbing as he learned his profession and educated himself. "I've always taken money too seriously," he said not long ago as he sat in his office at 630 Fifth Av., embellishing a small pad with red crayon doodles. "It took me a long time to get over it. I never tried to make a lot because I'm no good at it—I haven't had the knack. I don't admire anybody who can just make money—it's a gimmick."

Harrison's rise in a field that he stumbled on almost by accident at an age when his contemporaries were still devoting their leisure time to softball remains a remarkable story of stamina and grit. Finding himself obliged to make his own way, Harrison sought out a Worcester, Mass., builder named O. W. Norcross, a friend of a friend of the family's, and asked for a job as an office boy.

Norcross' response was in the classical tradition of the biographical cliché. "Don't be a fool, son," he told him. "Go into farming. That's where the money is." But he put the boy to work at $3 a week.

An only child, Harrison was born 67 years ago in Worcester where his father was a superintendent for a foundry and machine shop. His childhood was reasonably normal and reasonably pleasant until his 14th year, when his mother died.

"My mother was the one who held the home together. After she died, my father more or less went to pieces—he started going off on drinking binges. I just decided I had to go to work."

At school, Harrison had shown a talent for sketching but he was inclined to disguise it because such gifts were considered "sissified" by his playmates. But Norcross soon put him to work drawing stone diagrams, careful perspectives that indicated to the stonecutter the size and shape of stones to be supplied for architraves. It was the vicissitudes, to be an extended love affair with building design. "In a short time, it became my life."

It is a life Harrison looks back on rarely and with more pain than pleasure, since he is not given to romanticizing poverty. His regime included walking several miles to and from work, a difficult exercise on a daily diet of sandwiches.

"I've known what it is to be without food, without any money, without any place to go," he says quietly. "I think poverty degrades. The difference is one sandwich. If you've got a sandwich, you're all right."

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AFTER A TIME, HIS FATHER LEFT WORCESTER and Harrison moved into a room he shared with the head office boy, beginning a period of feverish and competitive self-education.

"We competed in everything. We'd get up in the morning and race each other to the office. At night, we'd race each other home, and race through new books. We started learning math together, then history, then structural materials. When we found there were books we should read in French, we went to Berlitz to learn French. We wanted to know about reinforced concrete, so we found a professor at Worcester Tech, and persuaded him to start a reading class at his home."

After four years, Harrison, by then earning $9 a week, left Norcross and joined a local architectural firm as a junior draftsman. He stayed there until 1916 when, having saved $35, he came to New York and moved into a rooming house on West 23d St.

Then he headed for McKim, Mead & White and asked for a job. McKim was the country's leading architectural firm, famed for its designs of important neo-classic public buildings such as Penn Station and for the great neo-Renaissance mansions it built for millionaire clients.

Harrison was burdened with neither letters of introduction nor stage fright. "I wanted to go to the best," he said. "What's the point of going anywhere else?"

There were no openings and, in time-honored tradition, Harrison offered to work for nothing. "They put me to work helping a man get up a book of drawings of hospitals. A couple of weeks later, they hired me at $20 a week."

A member of the Naval Coastal Defense Reserve, Harrison was called to active duty in the summer of 1917. Discharged two years later, he found himself, for the first time in his life, affluent. He had saved $1,000 and, determined to study at the Beaux Arts in Paris, he passed a grueling 12-hour exam and settled down in that city for a year. After that, he won a year's traveling fellowship which he spent minutely examining the great architectural monuments of the Old World.

For the next five years Harrison worked at a variety of jobs, the most munificent being a short, unhappy stint in 1927 as an architect for the New York Board of Education which paid a "perfectly enormous" $7,500 a year, enabling him to marry Ellen Milton, a young social worker.

Shortly before, her brother David had married Abby Rockefeller, daughter of John D. Rockefeller Jr. Shortly after his own marriage, Harrison was rescued from the school board by an offer of a junior partnership in Helmle & Corbett. Three years later H & C was one of the four firms chosen to design Rockefeller Center.

There was no connection between the marriages and the selection of the firm, but there was a connection between Harrison's presence on the project and his subsequent position virtually as "court architect" to the Rockefellers, for whom he has since designed homes, office buildings and public structures.

As Gov. Rockefeller told it to a New Yorker magazine profilist some years ago, his enduring friendship with Harrison dates from the day he accompanied his father, John D. Jr., to a meeting of seven architects gathered to discuss the exterior of the RCA Building.

"Father was accustomed to buildings that had fluted columns or Gothic arches marching up their sides and he was outlining his ideas on the subject," the Governor recalled. "The architects all listened until Father had finished and then Wally exploded. 'Goddam it, Mr. Rockefeller, you can't do that,' he said. 'You'll ruin the building if you cover up its lines with all that classical gingerbread.'"

Harrison spent nearly a decade working on the Center, and when it was completed in 1939, he had emerged as the "strong man" of the group, the single figure who seemed capable of pushing through the work and settling disagreements before they degenerated into a test of wills.

Seven years later, his demonstrated abilities as an "architect-in-chief" made him the logical choice to superintend the design of the UN headquarters, a collaborative effort that united 17 important architects from 15 countries and produced a unanimous design in four months—a feat which should really have been impossible.

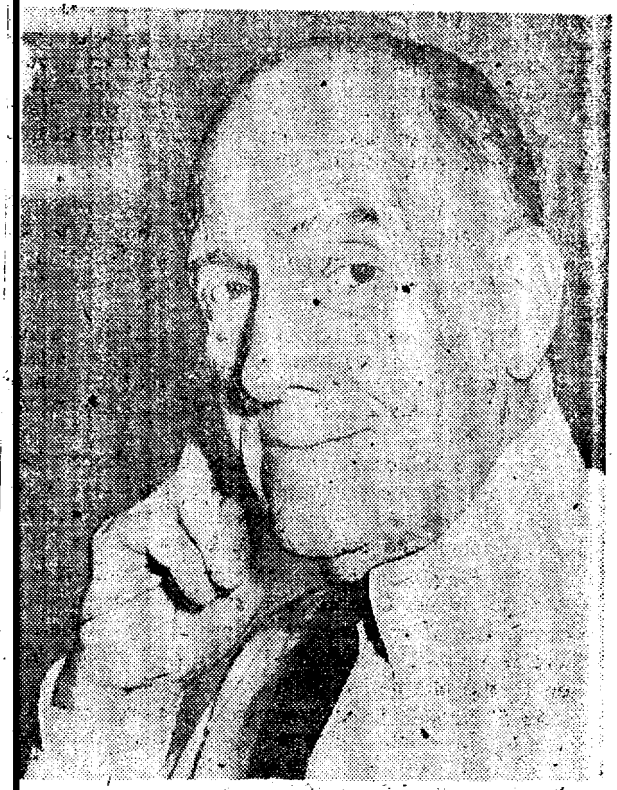
Harrison is especially well known as a practical man who gets things done, but he is also a poet, and the two facets do not live together comfortably. Asked one day whether he enjoyed coordinating big projects, he exploded:

"I hate it. But I've had to do it because I've had to make a living. Poor old Bach had to walk behind the hearse once a week; otherwise, he didn't get his organist's pay. I get more fun out of designing a small thing than a big one. Architecture is something small—something you can touch with your fingers.

"We've done skyscrapers. It's part of the system. I don't like designing with other people. You couldn't write a poem with three people looking over your shoulder, telling you what word comes next. But you can't build skyscrapers alone.

"But again, I'm glad to have lived in the era of the skyscraper. I think to this day I'm lucky to have had a part in Rockefeller Center—the tower was one of the healthiest things built in our time. We never did anything to make it beautiful—we made it healthy."

No other art form is more exposed to criticism than



Post Photo by Calvacca

WALLACE K. HARRISON
"You can't build skyscrapers alone."

architecture, and after all these years, Harrison still shudders in the raw wind of critical rebuke.

"If you have the fun of doing something, you have to learn to take the consequences. But I can't anesthetize myself against criticism. Sometimes it does an awful lot of good. Bad criticism has helped me get better plans accepted for later buildings. So it isn't all a loss, although sometimes it damn near kills you if you read it."

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Harrison and his wife live in a comfortable but far from luxurious apartment on Fifth Av. and spend their week-ends in an unpretentious collection of buildings in Huntington, L. I., to which he sometimes flees on work days in order to escape telephone interruptions. But he remains a lover of New York.

In this context, he suddenly leaned forward during an interview and earnestly asked, "Now, can we do something constructive with this article?"

Harrison, it developed, wanted a forum and we are happy to give him one:

"We can't go on duplicating Manhattan by piling 50 plots of ground on top of one another, without choking the city to death.

"We've got to cut through bigger streets to open up the city to traffic. The dirt and filth of the city are inexcusable—we've got to regulate the size of cars and think of developing electrical automobiles.

"And I think our housing is inhuman. Housing has to be taken back to the children. We're building up great blocks of red brick buildings without areas where a child can play. We've got to put playgrounds right into those buildings. We've got to put terraces on apartments where mothers can be with children—places where they'll get the wind and the sun.

"You may say we can't afford to, but I say we can't afford not to. We've got to realize that the almighty buck isn't the thing that's important. If you're not willing to spend to build better buildings and better human beings, then you better quit. I think all I've ever learned is summed up in that."

TOMORROW: Joseph H. Hirshhorn

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